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ABSTRACT

A simulation game designed as a tool for teaching parenting skills is described. This board game, called MANDALA, guides participants through the process of rearing a child from conception to adolescence. Assuming the parenting role, players must cope with true-life experiences of their child. A throw of the dice sends players through the various stages of their child's development. Points are awarded along the way for coping correctly with problems, and one is encouraged to voice support of alternatives to various parent-child interactions as the game unfolds. The advantages of simulation games in family-life classes and parenting groups in lieu of more traditional educational techniques are discussed. The game format for MANDALA is presented and the procedures for playing are described in detail. Suggestions for versatile uses of MANDALA are presented. (Author/JMB)

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MANDALA: Developing Parenting Skills Through A Simulation Game

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ABSTRACT

A board game, called MANDALA, guides participants through the process of rearing a child from conception to adolescence. Assuming the parenting role, players must cope with true-life experiences of their child. A dice throw sends players through the various stages of a child's development. Points are awarded along the way for coping correctly with problems, and one is encouraged to voice support or alternatives to various parent-child interactions as the game unfolds. The paper discusses guidelines for game play and the advantages of simulation games in family-life classes and parenting groups in lieu of more traditional techniques.

MANDALA: DEVELOPING PARENTING SKILLS THROUGH A SIMULATION GAME

To keep your preschool child from running through the house, you say, "The bogeyman will get you." Go back two spaces.

Your preschool child streaks through the room during an adult party. Advance to Rest and Relaxation to gain control.

You wash your 12-year-old's jeans and find a marijuana cigarette in a pocket. What is your reaction?

Your preteen child whose idol is Evel Knievel builds a huge ramp over the driveway and plans to jump it with a bicylce. What do you do?

These situations are part of a new way of teaching parenting skills and principles of child development. They are part of a board game in which players rear an imaginary child. The game is called MANDALA (Robinson & Baker, 1977). The "parent" copes from conception to age 12 with true-life experiences such as a baby spitting out carrots to a young boy who likes to dress in girls' clothes.

More and more in today's society family-life educators and families themselves are coming to realize that being a good parent is not inborn. The awareness level of the public is being raised on this issue, and families are more than ever seeking out ways of improving their interrelationships.

This paper describes one means through which parenting skills are articulated. MANDALA was designed as a learning tool to be used with individuals or small groups who have one thing in common: The desire to learn about the young child's development and to explore alternatives for fostering optimal growth. These individuals include parents, preparents, grandparents, teachers of young children, students of family life and early education and others. Counselors, family practitioners, educators, and psychologists may find this to be a useful tool.

Advantages of Simulation Games

The medium of the simulation game was chosen because simulations offer a number of distinct advantages over traditional educational techniques. Students are able to anticipate and deal with situations before they actually face the real-life occurrence. For example, through MANDALA, prospective parents can become aware of what it is like being a parent before actually making that commitment. Players are allowed to experience the immediate consequences of their behavior. Upon re-evaluation, they can change their course of action. It is possible to experiment through trial and error with solutions and ideas without the penalties of reality (Rogers & Kysilka, 1970).

Games of this nature allow the participants to experience a sense of controlling the future by stressing the learning by doing philosoply which requires active participation in the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains (Gillespie, 1974). Another important advantage of simulated activities is the emphasis on communicative skills, persuasion, and influence-resisting techniques (Rogers & Kysilka, 1970). The players are placed in a position to make decisions, raise questions, make judgements, try out answers, and to explore alternatives.

Game Format for Playing MANDALA

The MANDALA game includes board, markers, and die. There are 16 Mandala cards in each period of development: Infancy, Early Childhood, Middle Childhood, and Late Childhood. There are eight transition cards which serve as a bridge to each of these age periods.

Points are gained from the Mandala blocks on the board, designated by the symbol ⊕. When players locate here, they select a card from the Mandala stack. On the cards are described situations related to the COGNITIVE, EMOTIONAL, SOCIAL,

and PHYSICAL areas. Players either receive points or lose points in one of the developmental areas when they draw a card.

The object of the game is to develop the whole child by obtaining five points in each of the four developmental areas and reaching the Mandala in the center of the board. It is understood that the four areas cannot be so neatly separated as the game indicates. In real life all areas of development overlap and interrelate. This clear separation is used in the game for learning purposes.

There is an obvious chance factor operating in any game of this type. Some players may reach the Mandala without the five points in each developmental area. It is, therefore, important to stress the discussion and the process of playing the game; that is, the learning which occurs throughout rather than the points accumulated at the end. The score card is divided into two parts (see Table 1). The left portion contains the rows for the developmental areas: COGNITIVE (COG), EMOTIONAL (EMO), SOCIAL (SOC), and PHYSICAL (PHY). The right portion contains the Learning Center. Some of the Mandala cards award points in the developmental areas. These plus points are recorded in the left side of the card in the appropriate row, marked COG, EMO, SOC, and PHY. Certain blocks on the board will award bonus points. All bonus points can be distributed among the four developmental areas in any way players choose to obtain their five points. All minus points are recorded in the right side of the score card in the section called Learning Center. There are 24 numbers on the Learning Center score card. Some of the Mandala cards give instructions to circle one of these numbers in the Learning Center. Note that beside each number there is a minus point. This minus point will be applied against each score unless removed before reaching the Mandala.

TABLE 1

MANDALA SCORE CARD

DEVELOPMENTAL AREA													SUB TOTAL	MINUS POINTS	SUB TOTAL	BONUS	TOTAL
COG.																	
EMO.																	
SOC.																	
PHY.																	
BONUS																	

LEARNING CENTER			
1	-2 SOC.	13	-2 COG.
2	-2 PHY.	14	-2 EMO.
3	-2 EMO.	15	-2 SOC.
4	-2 EMO.	16	-2 COG.
5	-1 SOC.	17	-2 EMO.
6	-2 COG.	18	-2 PHY.
7	-2 SOC.	19	-2 COG.
8	-2 PHY.	20	-1 PHY.
9	-1 EMO.	21	-1 PHY.
10	-1 PHY.	22	-2 SOC.
11	-2 SOC.	23	-2 EMO.
12	-1 COG.	24	-1 COG.

Game Procedure

Conception

All movement begins at Conception. To begin players choose a marker. Those who wish to have a girl at birth turn the marker to the side stamped ♀ and place it on Conception. Those desiring a boy turn their marker to the side stamped ♂ . Players may want to tell the group at this time why they chose a boy or girl. Each player then takes a turn with playing proceeding to the left. As the die is rolled, players move to the appropriate block.

Prenatal Development

A die throw sends players through the various stages of their child's development. The first section passed through is the Prenatal stage. Players move to the blocks corresponding to the number rolled and follow the directions in that block. They may be instructed to lose a turn because "Mother is told to stop use of tobacco and alcohol but doesn't stop" or may get an extra turn for "Taking moderate exercise daily and eating a balanced diet."

Birth

From prenatal development, players progress into the section designated as Birth. At this time their child is born. A roll of the die determines the sex of the child. This symbolizes the genetic chance factor operating in sex determination. A die throw of 1-2-3 yields a female child and numbers 4-5-6 indicate a male. All males receive a bonus point at birth. This symbolizes that male newborns are more highly valued in our society and that, traditionally, males have received greater rewards than females. There are also advantages that females have over males. Later in the game, this is represented when females are given a bonus point for advanced physical development in Late Childhood. Once sex of child is determined, the marker is turned to the side marked with the corresponding symbol for sex. If a participant wanted one sex child but got the opposite sex, s/he should discuss feelings concerning this dilemma.

Developmental Periods

Following Birth, the game is divided into four developmental periods: Infancy (ages 0-2), Early Childhood (ages 3-5), Middle Childhood (ages 6-9), and Late Childhood (ages 10-12). In each of these sections, there are two sets of cards, one set is the Mandala cards which have already been mentioned. The second set is the Transition cards. As players land on the block that directs them to these cards, they select the proper one and follow the instructions given on the card. Players always read the directions aloud and react and/or discuss the events pertaining to the cards. Other players should be encouraged to share in the experience by expressing opinions, values, and feelings regarding the incident.

Mandala Cards

The statements on the Mandala cards are followed by what the "parent" did. If s/he acted in a positive way, s/he is given points as a reward. If inappropriate behavior occurs, players are told to circle a number in the section called Learning Center on the score card (see Table 1). Later players have an opportunity to remove the minus before it is applied against the final score. Examples of the Mandala cards are presented in Table 2.

Transition Periods

A transition period is a marginal period of development in which the child obtains new and better skills and abilities and sheds earlier, primitive ways of doing things. The suddenness and uncertainness of the transition are sometimes difficult for both parent and child. Throughout the game, there are transition periods which serve as a bridge to each of the age periods. When players land on the transition blocks, they must draw a transition card. The transistion cards bring their own set of difficulties as they require players to role play or in some way resolve situations related to child rearing (see Table 3).

TABLE 2. MANDALA CARDS[a]

Infancy (0-2 Years)

1. Sex-role stereotyping has been shown to be limiting to the child's development. You try not to "box" your child into any stereotyped roles by providing toys that are not sex typed. +3 Social Development

2. Toilet training is a gradual process which requires that the parent be patient. This is a time in which bowel control is learned. This morning your child's pants were soiled. In your anger you resorted to spanking. Circle #4 in Learning Center.

Early Childhood (3-5 Years)

1. All physical development goes from the central part of the body to the outer parts (proximodistal development). Your child has difficulty in manipulating small objects. Until the small muscles are better developed, you provide the child with playthings and objects large enough to manage. +1 Physical Development.

2. At the stage of autonomy versus doubt, children learn new self-management skills. For the past month you have been getting up too late for the child to exercise these skills. You have done them for the child, and the child is developing a sense of self-doubt. Circle #9 in Learning Center.

Middle Childhood (6-9 Years)

1. During the concrete operations period, children learn to think logically. Last Saturday you had an attic sale. You let your child classify items for sale. Under your supervision, you let the child help make change to customers. +2 Cognitive Development.

2. Parents can harm their offspring's social development by exercising too little or too much control over their behavior. You set no limits and let your child come and go at will. Circle #15 in Learning Center.

Late Childhood (10-12 Years)

1. It is important to acquire a set of moral principles by which to live. Your child is at the "good-child" stage of moral development and accepts the values of others. You encourage your child to develop personal values and beliefs rather than conforming to those of others. +2 Emotional Development.

2. Later childhood is a time of unevenness in physical development because some parts grow faster than others. Your child is awkward and clumsy. You nickname your child "Klutz." Circle #21 in Learning Center.

[a]These are samples from the four decks, which each contain 16 cards.

Nature-Nurture Blocks

One way of explaining development is in terms of the inherited traits of the child such as temperament, hair color, or eye color. Another way is by the influences in the environment which are responsible for the training or shaping of behavior. It is generally accepted that a person develops as a result of both inherited characteristics (nature) and influcences in the environment (nurture). The Nature-Nurture blocks describe a child-rearing practice that the player adheres to. Players read the blocks, follow the directions and discuss their reactions to the information given in the blocks. During Infancy, one Nature-Nurture block reads: "Because you believe in Rousseau's idea of the child being innately good, you are permissive in child rearing and allow the child to 'Rule the Roost.' Lose Turn." During Early Childhood, another possibility is: "Electrical storms terrify you. Whenever lightning strikes, you grab your child and run to the nearest dark closet. Roll die. Go back number rolled." At his point players have an opportunity to discuss the impact of such adult behavior upon the young child between two and five. The issue of how fears are learned and conveyed might center the discussion around social-learning research. Alternatives to the behaviors described can also be explored.

During Middle Childhood, "Your child is bringing home poor marks. You believe that intelligence is 80% inherited, so you pat the child on the head and don't expect too much. Go back to 6th birthday. No bonus point." Discussion of this circumstance might center around the highly controversial Jensen debates or take the direction of the pygmalion effect as depicted in Rosenthal's research. During Late Childhood, "Your agressive child has trouble in school. A friend says it's in the child's blood, but you believe in the equal importance of heredity and environment. So, you look for possible causes in the child's world. Advance 1 space." This event has implications for discussion on the research in ethology or for structuring a contingency-management system based on Skinner's operant conditioning principles.

TABLE 3. TRANSITION CARDS[a]

1. Transition A. In striving for independence, your two-year-old becomes very negative and has temper tantrums, throwing self onto the floor, screaming and banging fists. Tell your reaction.
2. Transition B. Pretend you are an adviser and respond to the following letter:

   Dear Mother Goose:

   My five-year-old is bed wetting. I am so upset, I don't know what to do. I've whipped him severely and taken privileges away, but nothing seems to work. Help!

   From Swamped
3. Transition C. The "looking-glass self" says that adults help children form their self-concept by what they mirror to children through actions and words. Choose another player to be your child. You be the looking glass (Adult) and mirror nonverbally to the "child" some positive feelings. Then, mirror negative feelings. Ask the "child" what it felt like.
4. Transition D. Your twelve-year-old wants to spend a week-end at the beach with some older adolescent friends. Your child says there will be no chaperone but that the group can take care of themselves. Choose a player to be the child. Act out what you would say to each other.

[a]These are samples from the four decks, which each contain eight cards.

Miscellaneous Blocks

Although players do not get sent to jail, a chance to regain lost points is provided when they land on the blocks designated "The Little Red Schoolhouse" and are required to take a trip to the Learning Center. Each time players become situated on the Little Red Schoolhouse block, they have an opportunity to remove any minus point of their choice. The idea here is that a mistake was made in some aspect of child rearing. Players, however, can go back to school to learn a better way of dealing with the situation. They may choose one minus of their choice which has been recorded in the Learning Center on the score card. Next, they find the corresponding number to be found in the Learning Center Questions in the instruction booklet. The multiple-choice question is read aloud. If the question is correctly answered, an X through the circled number under the Learning Center section of the score card removes the minus point from the score. If the answer is incorrect, the minus remains on the score card and is subtracted from the final score in the end. Answers to the questions are provided in the instruction booklet.

The purpose of the R & R blocks (representing rest and relaxation) is to give the "parent" a chance to catch his/her breath and relax because child rearing can at times be hectic and exhausting. At points on the board, players are sent back to R & R as a time out to renew energies or to take a second look at problem situations. Other blocks such as Birthdays, Competent Parent Award, Successful Toilet Training, and so forth reward "parents" or their child for the particular experience described.

Concluding the Game

Once players pass through Late Childhood, they move into an area on the board called Developmental Assessment. The score card is checked. Where minuses exist, players have a chance to remove one minus of their choice by correctly answering a related question from the Learning Center Questions in the information booklet.

Next, if a deficiency exists in one developmental area (less than five points), players have a last chance to add points to the deficient area. For example, if a player's child is deficient in the EMOTIONAL area, s/he might choose the following question from the EMOTIONAL area in the instruction booklet:

EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT: When you see your child masturbating in private, what should you do?

1. Ignore it because it's a part of body exploration.
2. Shame the child.
3. Interrupt the activity with a spanking.
4. Withdraw all priviliges for a week.

If the correct answer is given (i.e., choice "A"), two points are added to the deficient area, and the player takes the road to Mandala.

Once inside the Mandala in the center of the board, players total their scores. Those scoring five or more points in each developmental area are successful in developing the whole child. Those who accrued less than five points in any one developmental area have a chance to tell other players what actions could be employed to improve their child's development in the deficient area. For example, if a player is deficient in PHYSICAL development, s/he might enroll the child in swimming classes or start a family exercise program. If the EMOTIONAL area needs a boost, one might choose to spend more time with the child by taking a greater interest in the child's activities or by planning more events that the family can participate in together. The point of discussion here is to illustrate how some children excel in one developmental area at the expense of another. Parents can explore their role for providing a balance in the lives of their children, thus synthesizing many of the points highlighted throughout the game.

Versatile Uses of MANDALA

MANDALA can be played by several small groups simultaneously or by one group as others look on. Onlookers can then participate in points of discussion as they arise. The game can be used for staff development, in classrooms, or at workshops.

It serves to teach, integrate, or review subject matter in formal courses or it can be used in less formal group settings.

In PTA groups, the game offers a medium to promote interaction between parents and teachers as they interact, share, and discuss points of view regarding children. In family life classes where there are males and females, the instructor may wish to pair men and women and allow them to play as couples. This arrangement promotes discussion about differences in beliefs about child rearing between "husband" and "wife." The game has been shown to be a means for "breaking the ice" at the beginning of a conference or school year. It is a quick way for participants to become acquainted and to learn individual differences in beliefs about children.

The word, "Mandala" means magic circle. Its design is the perfect emblem of complete unity and wholeness in Eastern and Western thought. Psychologist, Carl Jung (1939), has studied the Mandala symbol as a universal trend toward perfect wholeness or self-hood. The Mandala symbol has appeared for centuries in drawings and expressions of humankind. In The Psychology of Children's Art, Rhoda Kellogg (1967) has shown that it is drawn by modern children of all races and cultures beginning at the age of three. The name MANDALA in this game, symbolizes the development of the whole child.

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